

DIGITAL PARTNERING FOR PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

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The fabric of our nation is woven with the great ethics of families, faith and hard work. For people with developmental disabilities and their families, however, our history of inclusion in the country's workforce has been difficult. Vice-President and U.S. Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, in his final speech in Washington on November 1, 1977, observed, "The moral test of government is how it treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the aged; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped." The Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted over 16 years ago with the ideals of protecting the rights of people with disabilities to have jobs and enjoy the same opportunities afforded to all citizens. Yet employment opportunities remain hard to come by. We are all aware of the tired excuses: People with developmental disabilities do not have the skills, the training, need extra supervision or require extra costs to employ.

In Minnesota, a new partnership is changing these misperceptions. An effort initiated by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, and supported by state and local governments and private businesses, is providing real employment opportunities for people with developmental disabilities and their families. Employers, both private and public, are hiring people with developmental disabilities to digitally scan millions of documents and create searchable, lasting electronic records while eliminating thousands of dollars in storage costs. This partnership provides people with developmental disabilities good jobs and wages, and helps employers across the state meet their technological needs for E-government and data protection, fast document retrieval and delivery, and serves as an introduction to a dedicated workforce.

In the past, it was common to devote large quantities of square footage in desirable office settings to store old paper files, or spend thousands of dollars annually for off-site storage. Minnesota businesses and governments are now moving to electronic storage systems that save an enormous amount of space and costs, and without the hassles. We're not talking about a small advantage here. Think of a large vertical file cabinet storing 10,000 pages of paper documents. Converting that paper into a digital format eliminates the entire file cabinet and puts the information on a single compact disc. Think of the savings that can be achieved, particularly given the rising cost of high-demand office space.

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Many businesses and governments are partnering with the disabilities community and using innovative strategies to meet these common goals. The successes are mounting: A major digital imaging pilot project at the Governor's Council, then large-scale document conversion programs at the Minnesota Department of Human Services, and other state and local offices, and now private businesses. Our state and federal court systems are interested in this partnering, as are banks, law firms, health providers, and many other businesses. These efforts regularly employ several individuals with developmental disabilities, preparing and scanning files into a client-specific format. These digital imaging teams have processed millions of document pages, and counting.

In addition to getting the work done are the reports of how well these employees actually perform. Consistently, we hear of a diligent approach to their jobs, high levels of accuracy and superior attendance records. Simply put, these employees bring about strong satisfaction and support from their employers. Recently, 300 Minnesota businesses that employ people with disabilities took part in a study for the Governor's Council, the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the Department of Employment and Economic Development, and the Minnesota Council on Disability. These businesses rated their employees with a disability equal to or higher than employees without disabilities in similar positions, with the single exception of work speed. While these results are surprising to some, and perhaps even remarkable to others, they alleviate concerns that hiring a person with a disability puts an employer at a disadvantage, or in uncharted waters. Experience has shown that workers with disabilities are dedicated and conscientious, taking great pride in their performance. Recognizing this, the digital imaging partners set up specific procedures that provide a framework for people with developmental disabilities to perform, and guidelines that must be met throughout the process.

When provided the wonderful opportunity of employment, people with developmental disabilities are succeeding, and it is often life-changing. This is great news to the nearly 700,000 Minnesotans with disabilities, and to their families. It means so much more than a job. It means the opportunity to be part of something, contribute to successful outcomes, meet friends and colleagues, and build confidence and self-worth. Former U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger, co-author of the Americans with Disabilities Act, strongly advocates for this partnering: "Digital imaging dramatically increases employment opportunities for people with developmental disabilities. It is an excellent example of public-private partnering to improve the lives and health of our communities, and should be a model for inclusion in our nation's workforce."

And the partnering need not stop with digital imaging. After completing their digital imaging projects, Minnesota businesses are finding additional opportunities for people with developmental disabilities, believing that it is important to continue having them on their team. They are included in substantive work activities, attend luncheons, and receive pay raises for hard work performed.

Digital imaging is an efficient and accessible alternative to the ongoing financial burdens of document storage space and costs. Minnesota businesses are selecting this electronic system, and hiring people with developmental disabilities as their partners as they move into the future together. We encourage you to consider this partnering in your business and community. Please call the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities (651.296.4018; 877.348.0505 toll free), or visit the council's web site, www.mncdd.org for more information.